



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

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Study Guides for

Aging

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore the contours of faithfulness as we grow older. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

Caring as Honoring 2

Congregations are “soul communities,” in which young and old are soul-mates bound together as an extended family of God. How can congregations assure that senior adults are cared for and honored as resourceful contributors to community life, wisdom-givers, exemplars of the faith, and worthy recipients of care?

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Focus Article:

📖 Caring as Honoring
(*Aging*, pp. 9-17)

Suggested Article:

📖 Come, Let Us Worship
(*Aging*, pp. 79-82)

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Caring as Honoring

Congregations are “soul communities” where young and old are soul-mates bound together as an extended family of God. How can congregations assure that senior adults are cared for and honored as resourceful contributors to community life, wisdom-givers, exemplars of the faith, and worthy recipients of care?

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Matthew 15:1-9 and Ephesians 6:1-4

Responsive Reading†

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

**Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.**

Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps!

**Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!**

**Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!**

**Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!**

**Young men and women alike,
old and young together!**

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.

Praise the LORD!

Reflection

The commandment to honor our parents (Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16) goes beyond obeying and respecting them when we are children (Ephesians 6:1). Jesus consistently applied it to adults caring for their elders (Matthew 15:1-9; compare his statement to the rich young man in 19:19). Scripture instructs the church to extend respect and care to widows and to all elders (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 5:1-8). Of course, we care for the oldest among us not only from our commitment to upholding these biblical injunctions to honor them, but also because we were created for community with one another and with God. “Indeed, the grounds for honor-bestowing caring are found in the richness of the metaphor ‘image of God,’” writes Anne Streaty Wimberly. “When we see clearly this image in our elders, we likewise understand caring as honoring to be a journey of God’s people, the young and old together. The journey of the young with the elders is in preparation for their own continuing journey. It is the whole community’s learning from and responding to senior adults as persons of worth.” How can we make honor-bestowing care for our elders concrete in our lives?

▶ *Remembering* how the lives of specific older adults intertwine with our lives, even when we struggle with these memories,



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can lead us to honor them and other senior adults. As a student concluded to Wimberly, “We *must* care for and honor them because of the life God gave them and has given us through them, the wisdom shared by them, the needs they have for care, and the opportunity we still have to learn from their lives.” This remembering occurs only when we resist the youth orientation that separates the generations.

- ▶ Congregations fulfill their calling to be *soul communities* when they love and sustain their members as an extended family of God. They validate their older members as resourceful contributors in its ongoing life, as exemplars of the faith, and as repositories of wisdom. After senior adults can no longer actively participate in their gatherings, congregations validate their role as worthy recipients of care.
- ▶ Being present with older adults in conversation and listening is easily neglected in “our fast-paced, technological, productivity- and material-driven world.” We need to emphasize *relational time*, intentionally structured for “listening to and sharing the stories of life’s journey, engaging in moral discourse where it is called for, and participating with them and family members in discerning answers to difficult life and death questions,” Wimberly writes. “A relational orientation to time also understands that churches must become network builders, connecting senior adults with resources churches cannot provide, but are available in the wider community.”

Study Questions

1. How can you provide more “relational time” with older adults in your family and in your congregation? How can you cultivate more opportunities for remembering their contributions to your life?
2. Wimberly urges us to provide honor-bestowing care for the well-being of senior adults in seven aspects: spiritual, social, mental, physical, work and economic, recreational, and environmental (*Aging*, pp. 14-15). How does your congregation honor its older members in each of these ways?
3. John Westerhoff describes older adult, adult, and younger people as the generations of memory, the present, and vision (*Aging*, p. 81). How are these generations *linked* or *separated* in worship, study, and service in your congregation?
4. “‘Honor your father and mother’ is a social injunction designed for mature children and their even more mature parents,” David Buttrick notes. “Moreover, the commandment addresses corporate Israel. We Americans tend to read our Bibles as if every ‘you’ were second-person singular. But the Fifth Commandment is addressed to Israel and is intended to define social policy. In other words, the commandment has more to do with social security issues than with psychological attitudes within the family” (quoted in *Aging*, p. 72). What are the implications of this observation for our society?

Departing Hymn: “Then Dawns the Light”

†Adapted from Psalm 148 (NRSV).



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Focus Article:

📖 When Suffering
Continues
(*Aging*, pp. 26-35)

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When Suffering Continues

When we endure chronic illnesses we wonder, "Why do long-term afflictions come to God's people?" "How should we pray for healing?" Often we struggle with the book of James' teaching on health, healing, and faithful living in times of suffering.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: James 5:13-18

Responsive Reading†

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me, stand by me.
When the storms of life are raging, stand by me, stand by me.
**When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea,
Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me, stand by me.**
In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me, stand by me.
In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me, stand by me.
**When I've done the best I can, and my friends misunderstand,
Thou who knowest all about me, stand by me, stand by me.**
When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me, stand by me.
When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me, stand by me.
**When my life becomes a burden, and I'm nearing chilly
Jordan,
O thou Lily of the Valley, stand by me, stand by me.**

Reflection

Robert Rakestraw, who has endured heart disease for fifteen years, knows about chronic suffering: "It persists day after day and year after year, and this duration itself becomes a major part of the suffering." This is true for physical pain and for symptoms that involve other sorts of suffering, such as ringing in the ears, impairment of sight, loss of appetite, fatigue, breathing difficulties, mental disorders, emotional weaknesses, loss of memory and identity, or the effects of strokes and heart attacks.

God does not abandon us, but offers help for our physical needs. We see remarkable healings sometimes. Yet at other times we are not healed and we pray for others who are not healed. So, how should we understand the promise that "the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up" (5:15)?

- ▶ The *proper faith view* says health is restored if those who pray "have the right kind of faith." This creates much guilt for petitioners when they are not granted the healing they desire. "The prayer of faith," Rakestraw concludes, cannot be "so elusive and difficult to attain that even the most spiritual Christians today fail often to obtain it when seeking God's healing power. We need to be deeply grateful that God *does* answer our prayers for healing quite often, but we also need to recognize that, at times, the same people pray for healing in similar circumstances, yet see no healing."
- ▶ According to the *sovereign gift view*, "when God sovereignly chooses to heal, he gives the faith necessary for those praying." This fits with Paul's teaching that the spiritual gifts of faith and healing are given "to each one individually just as



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the Spirit chooses" (1 Corinthians 12:9, 11). Though this view rightly "honors God as the healer," Rakestraw notes, "it still leaves us with the question of why the invitation of James 5 is presented in such a wide-open manner, urging the seriously ill person to call the elders for healing and expressing such confidence that the healing will come."

- ▶ The *will of God* view suggests the promise of healing, like all other promises in the Bible, depends upon the will of God in each situation. "We are to ask for healing, knowing that God is able to do what we ask. However, we are to leave the outcome with our wise and gracious God, who may or may not choose to heal in this or that specific instance."

Rakestraw admits that he wavers between the *sovereign gift* and *will of God* views, though he favors the latter. Both views emphasize God's freedom in healing. On the *will of God* view, however, it is appropriate to add "if it is your will" to prayers for healing: we approach God with confidence, but without claiming to know precisely what God's will is in every situation.

Study Questions

1. Do you think the *proper faith*, the *sovereign gift*, or the *will of God* view is the best interpretation of the "prayer of faith" promise? What further questions do you have?
2. What do we learn from the larger context in James 5:13-18 about how God wants us to pray for the suffering? What is the role of the *community* of faithful disciples in this passage?
3. Does James 5 leave room for the application of our medical knowledge, or should faithful prayer replace those efforts?
4. Many Bible texts reveal that God is in favor of good physical health (see, for example, Exodus 23:25-26 and Psalm 103:2-5). What can we learn from Jesus' healing ministry described in Matthew 8:1-10:1 (and crystallized in 8:17)?
5. How does Paul illuminate the deep causes of suffering in the world in Romans 8:21-22?

Departing Hymn: "Abide With Me" (verses 1, 2, and 7)

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens: Lord with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see:
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Henry F. Lyte (1847)

Suggested Tunes: EVENTIDE or MORECAMBE

†From "When the Storms of Life are Raging," Charles Albert Tindley (1905).



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Focus Article:

📖 Declining with Grace
(*Aging*, pp. 36-42)

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Declining with Grace

When facing the losses of old age, some people “handle” the change from competency to dependency with serenity and composure, others with bitterness and disorientation. Gratitude and generosity—virtues that acknowledge we are not all strength and independence—prepare us for better adjustment in situations of loss.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

Responsive Reading†

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Reflection

The Apostle Paul reminded the Colossians that in their baptism, they “have died” and “been raised with Christ.” He appealed to their memories of disrobing and donning baptismal clothes: “you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:9b-10). Their new self, celebrating its interdependence within the “one body” of Christ, should generously brim with love, humility, and patience, and literally sing with gratitude!

In her hospice care practice, Elizabeth Roberts has noticed that “older persons who have ingrained in themselves, by long practice, the patterns of gratitude and generosity, handle disability better than the resentful and the grasping.” They display spiritual maturity in facing their dependency and weakness, have better relationships with caregivers, and can enjoy the good things in other’s lives. Developing gratitude and generosity, she and Bob conclude, “is a kind of long-term care insurance that we can practice every day of our lives, as is natural for those who are daily growing up in every way into him who is the head, our generous Lord Jesus Christ.”

- ▶ *Gratitude* is more than “positive thinking,” or looking on the bright side of events; it is gladness to be in relation *with* and receiving good things *from* someone. The Roberts distinguish the grateful person from a “deserver” who needs to feel entitled to the good things he receives. “The truly grateful



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person, by contrast, has a sense of not deserving the good she receives, and above all she does not insist on deserving all that she has." The grateful person differs from both an "ex-changer" who feels demeaned by any gift he cannot "pay back," and from a "grubber" who welcomes gifts but doesn't pay much attention to the givers. Christians are in an ideal position to become grateful persons, because "every good we have, both material and spiritual, is from the hand of a personal God who has given us these things without our deserving them," the Roberts write. "We are in no position to pay God back, and in no position simply to be heedlessly grubbing up all the goods we can."

- ▶ *Generosity* is a disposition to *give* graciously, just as gratitude is a disposition to *receive* graciously. The generous person gives freely from the heart, without a sense of the pressure of obligation, and with a loving attitude toward the recipient. "The grateful Christian will be generous" because she believes "that everything ultimately belongs to God, who showers us with his grace; if we are to be like him, we must become little showers in our own right," the Roberts write. "The practice of giving away, of sitting loose to one's possessions and time, and of seeing regularly beyond oneself to the needs and interests of others, is a kind of practicing-up for the inevitable losses that await us. It is a practice of detachment from ourselves that prepares us to move on, freely and gladly, to whatever God has in store for us."

Study Questions

1. Who, among the older people you know, are responding with grace to the dependency that attends old age? Do you see signs of gratitude and generosity in their lives?
2. Do you know older people who have been overwhelmed by the losses and suffering they must endure? How can your congregation serve them?
3. Comment on J. R. P. Schlater's observation: "Old age has many compensations, but it is always a discipline. The process by which God pries our fingers loose from their clutch on things material is not entertaining. The closing of the senses, the increasing feebleness of the physical powers, and the pathetic loneliness of great age make up a process of detachment which is stern in its mercy (cf. the frank depression of Ecclesiastes 11:7-8)." (Quoted by Stephen Sapp in *Aging*, p. 21.)
4. How can we prepare, during younger and middle-age years, to be more grateful for God's gifts and more generous with our resources in our later years?
5. Folliot S. Pierpoint's beloved hymn, "For the Beauty of the Earth," celebrates the gifts from a generous Creator. For what is the hymn writer thankful? How is this hymn a model for our gratitude?

Departing Hymn: "For the Beauty of the Earth"

† James 1:17-18, 22-25 (NRSV).



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Aging from the Perspective of the Cross
(*Aging*, pp. 18-25)

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Aging from the Perspective of the Cross

The cross Jesus Christ bids us to take up includes the ordinary, everyday sufferings of human life—including those associated with aging—when they are borne as Jesus bore his sufferings.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Luke 9:21-25; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 and 4:7-10

Responsive Reading†

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?

**No, there's a cross for everyone,
And there's a cross for me.**

**The consecrated cross I'll bear
Till death shall set me free;**

**And then go home my crown to wear,
For there's a crown for me.**

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?

Reflection

When we describe aging exclusively from the perspective of our hope in Christ's resurrection, we may give an unduly optimistic account of old age. Of course, with Paul, we rightly proclaim that about the suffering that attends old age and death, we need "not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Yet, we can offer a balanced view of aging and take seriously the real losses that we suffer as we grow older, Stephen Sapp urges, if we also look at old age from the perspective of the cross.

Taking up our daily cross in the normal afflictions of growing older would include:

- ▶ *Acknowledging our dependence.* Fearing dependency, we tend to preserve youthfulness by any means possible and to institutionalize those who need care. However, "Christianity is all about being dependent, accepting that we do not live on our own and only for ourselves at any point in life, not just when we grow old," Sapp observes. "If we can assimilate the fact that we are totally dependent throughout life upon the creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, then perhaps it will be easier to accept increasing dependence upon other human beings as we grow older."
- ▶ *Recognizing the true basis of personal value.* Consumerism pressures us to value people by what they *have* (physical attractiveness, vitality, and ability to produce) and *can consume* (in terms of the capacity to use and income to afford). No wonder that retirement threatens to empty our lives of meaning! By contrast, "the biblical teachings of the creation of all human beings in the image of God and of Christ's death for the sake of all...[affirms] that our value does not rest in what we *do* or *have*, but in what we *are* in God's sight." Furthermore, God may call us in old age to some great (or small) task.



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► *Accepting mutual responsibility.* “The suffering of each for Christ’s sake,” Sapp writes, “entails the sacrifice of each amid the limitations and suffering that are common to all human beings.” Or, as the Apostle Paul puts it, our afflictions should prepare us to offer consolation to one another. Elderly people, who feel pushed to the fringes of society, may be tempted to withdraw from younger people, adopt an “us against them” attitude, and dodge their responsibilities to their church and to caring for others. Yet the church, “functioning as the earthly body of its Risen Lord, who has called all his followers to take up their own crosses as he once did,” Sapp notes, “surely rejects making excuses for not participating in its work and activities, whatever one’s age.”

Study Questions

1. Have you been inspired by how an older person deals with suffering? Did this person carry “in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible” (2 Corinthians 4:10)?
2. Do you agree that we fear dependence upon others? If so, what are some examples of this fear?
3. Discuss President Jimmy Carter’s statement: “We are not alone in our worry about both the physical aspects of aging and the prejudice that exists toward the elderly, which is similar to racism or sexism. What makes it different is that the prejudice also exists among those of us who are either within this group or rapidly approaching it” (quoted in *Aging*, p. 70).
4. “Whatever our culture tells us about life being an inevitably demoralizing business of falling apart, it is not what human life is about,” Roberta Bondi writes. “Bodies do wear out and our minds do get slower, but human beings are made in the image of God who is love; and God’s intention for us, if we choose to pursue it, is continual growth—growth in love both of God and neighbor” (quoted in *Aging*, p. 71). How does this support Sapp’s “perspective from the cross”?

Departing Hymn: “Abide With Me” (verses 1, 2, and 8)

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens: Lord with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;
earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see:
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies:
heaven’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Henry F. Lyte (1847)

Suggested Tunes: EVENTIDE or MORECAMBE

†From verses 1 and 3 of “Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?” Verse one by Thomas Shepherd, *Penitential Cries*, 1693 altered; verse three from *The Oberlin Social and Sabbath School Hymn Book*, by George N. Allen, 1844.



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Aging with Hope and Wonder
(*Aging*, pp. 65-69)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Aging from the Perspective of the Cross
(*Aging*, pp. 18-25)
- 📖 The Gift of Years in Christian Art
(*Aging*, pp. 48-54)

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“Old and Full of Years”

If contemporary society continues to keep people alive and at the same time tell them that they no longer serve any purpose, then dying “in a good old age, old and full of years” in the biblical sense will be a thing of the past.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Genesis 18:1-15 and 25:7b-11

Reading†

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His Hand
Who saith “A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God, see all, nor be afraid!”

Reflection

“Though today, television, radio, and print media champion the young as models of vision, vigor, and imagination, as if these were the only people worthy of notice, the Bible portrays quite another story,” notes Terry Thomas Primer. “Many key characters, chosen by God to move forward the divine-human story, were senior citizens, many years past their prime, even according to our standards.”

Abraham and Sarah were already “old, advanced in age” — one hundred years old and ninety years old, respectively — when God visited them in the form of three mysterious men. Abraham’s hospitality was spontaneous and lavish: he and Sarah prepared a great meal and Abraham waited upon the guests as their servant. Then the focus shifts to Sarah, who has been out of view in the tent. “Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son’ (Genesis 18:10). It was a calling, a vocation, but such a strange one! Sarah stifled a laugh.

Primer, who is a nursing home chaplain, has shared this story with the residents she serves. “Would you like to be pregnant?” she asked them. “You should have heard the giggles. The women all looked at themselves and then at one another. In their faces you could see memories of pregnancy, childbirth, and two-year-olds running wild. Then, as they looked at themselves in wheelchairs and with walkers, they laughed deep throaty chuckles of relief. Not a single one of them volunteered to become a mother again.”

God’s invitation required Abraham and Sarah to respond with faith. Their baby’s name, Isaac, means “laughter,” recalling Sarah’s giggles in this story and Abraham’s deep belly laughter earlier when God promised them a son (Genesis 17:17). “In my mind’s eye I can see them, old beyond their years, getting undressed for the night as the stars begin to twinkle,” Primer muses. “Slipping into bed, they kiss, holding each other tightly — and I bet they laughed, hoping against hope that the heavenly visitors are right, that there is nothing too difficult for God.”



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This remarkable story reminds us that God appears in unexpected places and comes to us at any age. A fitting conclusion is found in the report that seventy-five years later “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years” (Genesis 25:8).

In this scripture old age is a highly desirable goal. Stephen Sapp suggests that a person “full of years” is like a container full of liquid: “it can hold no more and has fulfilled its purpose by containing all that it was designed to hold. Similarly, to die ‘full of years’ is to be satisfied, completed, indeed, ‘full-filled’ in a most literal sense, having lived all the years one was intended to live.” The biblical goal is not merely a longer life, but a life filled with purpose—with God’s call and our faithful response.

Study Questions

1. Do you know older people who, like Abraham and Sarah, make rich contributions to the lives of those around them? How do they hear and respond to God’s call?
2. Comment on Stephen Sapp’s statement: “One concrete way in which older people can avoid the trap of an empty old age that modern society seems to have laid for them is to be more careful about the ways they choose to fill their later years. In contemporary American society old age is often a period of role and status attrition.... How much more purpose might be found for the sometimes seemingly endless time if the lost responsibilities of job and children are replaced, not exclusively with self-oriented recreational pastimes, but with activities that contribute to the welfare of others?” (*Aging*, pp. 23-24)
3. “The present situation of many people, old and young alike, is a disease of the imagination,” warns Kathleen Fischer (quoted in *Aging*, p. 70). “We have accepted the negative images of old age. The task of a spirituality of aging is to convert the imaginations of both old and young to a new vision of the human. And this can only happen if the old themselves refuse to let society define them, and instead internalize new images of the later years. Large numbers of older people who refuse to be seduced by our current value system could be an unprecedented prophetic force in the world.” What new, positive images might we glean from the story of Abraham and Sarah?
4. What positive values of aging does Michelangelo depict in his sculpture *Moses* (*Aging*, pp. 50-51)? What positive values are captured in Roger Medearis’ painting of his grandmother, *Godly Susan* (*Aging*, pp. 48-49)?
5. What positive images of aging are celebrated in Terry York’s hymn, “Then Dawns the Light”?

Departing Hymn: “Then Dawns the Light”

†The opening stanza of Robert Browning, “Rabbi Ben Ezra.”



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Focus Article:

📖 What's Retirement For?
(*Aging*, pp. 73-78)

Suggested Article:

📖 God's Call in Later Life
(*Aging*, pp. 43-47)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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What's Retirement For?

Even though later years can burden us with serious illness of self or spouse, retirement may be our best chance to know ourselves and how we are shaped by our relationship to God, use ministry gifts in new ways, and discover new gifts and fresh energy.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Psalms 71:1-9 and 92:12-15

Responsive Reading†

O Day of God, draw nigh
in beauty and in power;
come with thy timeless judgment now
to match our present hour.

**Bring to our troubled minds,
uncertain and afraid,
the quiet of a steadfast faith,
calm of a call obeyed.**

Bring justice to our land,
that all may dwell secure,
and finely build for days to come
foundations that endure.

**Bring to our world of strife
Thy sovereign Word of peace,
that war may haunt the earth no more,
and desolation cease.**

Reflection

Forget the myth that the traditional retirement years of age sixty-five and beyond are about loafing. Most people delay leaving their careers or they continue working part-time. Some work because they need the money, but at least half say that they work for enjoyment and a sense of purpose. This new activism is changing the face of retirement. "Even the terminology has gotten fuzzy," Turner observes. "Ask people if they are retired, and you may hear, 'Yes, no, sort of, not really, I don't know.'"

Nevertheless, with the lengthening of life expectancy by about twenty-five years since 1900, we have more time of reduced labor to enjoy. These added years may be a wonderful "grace period." What shall we do with such a gift?

- ▶ *Reflection* is necessary in preparing for retirement. "The early days of retirement may well serve as a kind of sabbath pause where we rest, reflect, and prepare for a very different lifestyle," Turner writes. What expectations do we have? How realistic are they? What difficult changes lie ahead? What resources—physical, mental, and financial—will we need to support this new and challenging part of life? Of course, it would be wise to start our reflection on many of these issues in mid-life.
- ▶ A second retirement task is the *reframing* of our lives. Even when we try hard not to define ourselves by our work, we grieve the loss of work-related activities and colleagues.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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Suddenly time is *our own* and is relatively empty; when Turner retired, his “grandson’s gift of a special ‘retirement watch,’ with all the numbers and hands unattached and loose inside the casing, seemed wonderfully appropriate.” We need to be open to new callings in our lives.

- ▶ We can *reconnect* with life’s ultimate values as we ask: What are the core convictions of my life? How have they sustained me? Can they continue to shape me at this stage of my life? “This means that, at long last, we may concentrate on *being* at least as much as *doing*,” Turner reports. Though in mid-life we welcome our identity as disciples of Christ, or our *being*, much of our time is spent on *doing*—finishing school, getting a job, earning a living, buying a house, funding family expenses, trying to secure a sound financial future, and so on. “We cherish relationships with God, family, and friends at all stages of the life cycle, but we do live long in the grip of economic necessity and consumerism. With retirement comes our best chance to know ourselves and how we are shaped by our relationship to God.” The Apostle Paul put the focus here: “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). Spiritual growth is a more worthy goal for Christians in retirement than “staying busy” could ever be.
- ▶ Our lives, energies and gifts for ministry will be *redirected* as we allow God to transform all our relationships and all we do. “We may continue to use ministry gifts already discovered in different places and new ways. Or, we may discover different or delayed interests, new gifts, and fresh energy,” Turner observes. “Travel, continuing education, and renewed interpersonal contact, such as I now enjoy with my children and grandchildren, may well lead to exciting avocations or even second careers.”

Study Questions

1. What would a successful, faithful, and fulfilled retirement be for you? What do you fear may happen in your retirement?
2. What plans should we make in advance, during mid-life, for retirement? Financial planners help us prepare for financial needs. Who helps us plan for reconnecting with life’s deepest values and redirecting energies and gifts in retirement?
3. “Sometimes new directions emerge out of painful necessity,” Turner admits. “The sobering realities of disability, divorce, or the death of a spouse can shift directions and priorities in unique and difficult ways.” How can we prepare for these?
4. What creative approaches for spiritual growth and contribution in later life does Beth Jackson-Jordan recommend? Does your congregation provide similar opportunities for older members? (See *Aging*, pp. 43-47).

Departing Hymn: “Then Dawns the Light”

†“O Day of God, Draw Nigh,” Robert B. Y. Scott (1937).

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings

Each lesson plan is for a 30 to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Caring as Honoring

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To understand how the commandment to honor our parents is applied to adult children.
2. To reflect on how we should provide honor-bestowing care for the elderly in our congregations and in our society.
3. To appreciate the need to integrate older members in the worship, study, and service of the congregation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Read the story Wimberly tells about the eighty-year-old woman who recommitted her life to faithful service in her church. It begins: "A pastor told me about an eighty-year-old woman of his church who, when the invitation to Christian discipleship was given one Sunday, walked to the altar and said: 'I want to give my life to Christ'" (*Aging*, p. 13).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Lead members to thank God for the gifts of guidance and encouragement they have received from specific older adults in their lives.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Matthew 15:1-9 and Ephesians 6:1-4 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The basis for honor-bestowing care to older adults includes, in addition to the commandment to honor our parents, two other biblical themes. First, the church is instructed to extend respect and care to widows and to all elders. If time permits, the group might want to discuss Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 5:1-8. Second, the image of God in all human beings includes their calling to be related properly to God and one another. When we recognize the image of God in older adults, we see how they are called to be related with younger people in "a journey of God's people, the young and old together. The journey of the young with the elders is in preparation for their own continuing journey."

Even after we know with our theological heads that we should honor older adults, how do we become committed in our hearts to their care? This study surveys three of Wimberly's recommendations. Enrich your discussion, as time permits, with her rich presentation in the *Aging* issue: (1) that we inten-

tionally *remember* older members' contributions to our lives (see *Aging*, pp. 11-12); (2) that we *validate their continuing roles* within our congregations (pp. 12-14); and (3) that we increase our *relational time* with them, despite the temptations in our culture to isolate the generations (pp. 15-16). [Wimberly's fourth recommendation, that we address older adults' well-being in seven aspects, can be discussed in study question two.]

Study Questions

1. Members might discuss how the congregation provides *relational time* (a) by receiving older adults in group meetings and sharing responsibility with them; (b) by providing opportunities for them to share their rich stories; and (c) by networking with other community resources in order to meet senior adults' needs. Wimberly describes how she encourages students to remember older adults' contributions (p. 11). Beth Jackson-Jordan recommends creative ways for congregations to listen to their stories (pp. 46-47). Ask members how they can do similar things within their families.
2. In the interest of time, members may want to focus on only two or three of the aspects that are most significant to them. Or, you might ask individuals or smaller groups to think about each of the aspects, and then report their conclusions to the whole group.
3. Members might respond to Terry York's ideas for intergenerational worship in "Come, Let Us Worship" (*Aging*, pp. 79-82). York suggests that linking generations in worship is best accomplished when they are linked throughout the other activities of the congregation. Are there opportunities for intergenerational Bible study and prayer? Do mission trips, church recreation opportunities, and outreach ministries involve several generations? Are all three generations represented on major committees and planning groups?

Who are the Christian models for younger people in the congregation? What will be missed if young people do not worship and minister regularly with older members? Ask for members' response to Katie Wiebe's comment: "Association with the older generation gives the younger generation practice in the art of living and dying. Life should not be a disjointed affair with each generation living isolated from the next, like sausage links. Life is a flowing stream.... My conclusion is that growing older Christian is not much different than growing up Christian. It's a matter of models and support. Mother and Dad were my models growing up. Older adults are my models now. I can be a model to younger men and women" (quoted in *Aging*, p. 72).

4. Christians can help provide for the needs of older adults in the larger society by offering a biblical rationale for honoring the elderly, and, through the church, a model of how a community can care for their needs. We can volunteer in community organizations that provide direct care, such as meals to shut-in people, hospice care, and so on. We can help older people know about and use the government agencies that provide social security. We should show concern for all older people in society, by advocating for adequate social security and health care.

Departing Hymn

"Then Dawns the Light" is on pp. 55-57 of *Aging*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

When Suffering Continues

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	James 5:13-18	Matthew 8:14-17 and 9:27-10:1
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (review all)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3, 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To understand how we should apply the “prayer of faith” promise in James 5:15.
2. To reflect on our calling as a community of faithful disciples to pray for those who are sick and suffering.
3. To share our experiences and perplexities about prayers for healing from suffering.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the hymn “Abide With Me,” locate the tune EVENTIDE in your church’s hymnal. (An alternate tune is MORECAMBE.)

Begin with a Story

Summarize author Robert Rakestraw’s story, which begins “I was diagnosed with heart disease at the age of 41” (*Aging*, pp. 26-27).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with prayers by name for individuals whose suffering is chronic.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 5:13-18 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Many people experience chronic suffering caused by accidents, diseases, or physical and mental decline. This is particularly true as we grow older. Do group members have experience with chronic suffering? Do they agree that its *continuation* becomes a major part of the suffering? Invite group members to share briefly personal stories about their own or others’ chronic suffering, and the questions of faith that they struggle with. Rakestraw addresses the question, “How should we pray for healing?” This may be a painful topic for many members, especially those who have prayed and not received the healing they desire.

Briefly outline the three interpretations of the “prayer of faith” in James 5:15. Each view acknowledges that sometimes God answers our prayers with the restoration of health. Rakestraw seeks an interpretation of the “prayer of faith” that (1) preserves the sovereign freedom of God in the healing process, (2) is consistent with other biblical teachings, and (3) fits with our experience as Christians. The

proper faith view makes healing depend too much on the degree or purity of the petitioners' trust in God; consequently it places great guilt upon petitioners who do not experience healing. Rakestraw wavers between the latter two views, which leave the timing and type of healing up to God's will. He leans toward the *will of God* interpretation as more consistent with the interpretation of other biblical promises (for these, too, are conditional on God's will in the particular situations) and with Christians' experiences.

Members may want to explore other biblical passages concerning suffering and healing as time permits in the session, or in a second session. Matthew 8:14-17 and 9:27-10:1 are a recommended selection of stories about Jesus' healing ministry.

Study Questions

1. Rakestraw's reasons for preferring the *will of God* view are outlined in the study guide and lesson plan. He mentions other vexing questions: "Why do these long-term afflictions come to God's people? Is my illness my fault, at least in part?...How aggressively should we pursue healing through traditional medicine? What about alternative medicine? How do we live as faithful Christians when suffering continues and healing does not come? What is God saying to me through these trials, and how might I be a more effective servant of Jesus Christ because of them? Do I really want to be healed?" (*Aging*, pp. 27-28).
2. Members might mention that the elders, who lead and represent the church community, should be ready to pray for healing and to anoint "in the name of the Lord." They should pray with confidence in God's power and concern for our suffering. There should be mutual confession of sins in the community. Those praying should be "righteous," not because they are perfect, but because they are "in Christ," the righteous One. All of these features point toward God, rather than the goodness of the petitioners, as the source of healing.
3. Most commentators believe the anointing oil was not a medicine, but a symbol of the Spirit's power to heal (compare the instructions to the disciples in Mark 6:13). "Such a view," Rakestraw suggests, "does not rule out the use of medical science, nor does it focus on the oil as the primary requirement for healing" (*Aging*, pp. 28-29).
4. Matthew 8-9 gathers eight healing stories from Jesus' ministry: a leper comes to Jesus (8:2-4); a Roman centurion seeks healing for his servant at home (8:5-13); Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law's fever (8:14-17); Jesus drives demons from two demoniacs (8:28-9:1); people carry a paralyzed man to Jesus (9:2-8); while a synagogue leader pleads for healing of his daughter, a woman who touches Jesus' cloak is healed of bleeding (9:18-26); and Jesus heals two blind men (9:27-31) and cures a demoniac who is mute (9:32-35). Several mention the faith of the sick person or their caregivers, but others do not. Matthew 8:17 says that Jesus fulfills prophecy in Isaiah 53:4 of a suffering servant who "bore our diseases" on himself. Interspersed through chapters 8 and 9 are stories of Jesus calling disciples, and in 10:1 he commissions them to continue his healing ministry.
5. Rakestraw summarizes, "not everyone who loves God and seeks to live a life that is pleasing to God enjoys good health. The apostle Paul explains that this is because 'the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now,' and that we are in 'bondage to decay' (Romans 8:21-22). The entrance of sin into this world brought disease and decay to all of us" (*Aging*, p. 28).

Departing Hymn

"Abide With Me," which is a hymn for Communion, or the Lord's Supper, reminds us that Jesus' suffering was for us and that he is continually present with us through worship. It is based on Jesus' resurrection appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized [Jesus]; and he vanished from their sight" (Luke 24:29-31).

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Declining with Grace

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the practices of gratitude and generosity can help us cope with the dependency that accompanies old age.
2. To reflect on how, throughout our younger and middle-age years, we can become more grateful for God's gifts and more generous with these resources.
3. To appreciate the models that older people can be in our lives, showing by example how we can 'decline with grace.'

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth" in your church's hymnal. See the website www.cyberhymnal.org for the eight original verses of this hymn.

Begin with a story

Read or retell the stories of the two hospice patients, George and Steve, who have very different reactions to their losses and suffering at the end of life. The stories are at the beginning of the Roberts' article, "Declining with Grace" (in *Aging*, pp. 36-37).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God would give members thankful hearts that are open to seeing and welcoming our daily dependence upon God's love.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 3:12-17 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Allow the scripture reading and responsive reading to set the stage for the discussion of gratitude and generosity. In Colossians 3:12-17 the Apostle Paul reminds us that gratitude to God and one another, and generosity of spirit expressed through patience, bearing with one another, and forgiveness, are central to life in the Christian community. These virtues are to be "put on" as we grow into and live out our baptism.

James begins by saying that generosity defines God's character, and we are to become like God—"a kind of first fruits of his creatures" who have been given birth "by the word of truth" (James 1:17-18).

Both passages emphasize that our deeds, and not merely our speech, should be thoroughly informed by these virtues. James warns us to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22). Paul writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" so that "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:16-17).

Gratitude is a *virtue*, or a pattern and practice of living rather than a momentary feeling. The Roberts highlight four distinguishing features of the practice of gratitude: (1) we welcome the relationship with the one who is caring for us; (2) we receive this care as a gift, rather than as something we deserve; (3) we do not interpret the care as fulfillment of a contract, or as an action that we must “pay back” in order to “even the score”; and (4) we keep our focus on the giver and our relationship, rather than on the accumulation of the gifts.

The *virtue* of generosity has much in common with gratitude, though generosity involves giving rather than receiving. The generous person (1) welcomes relationship with the recipient, (2) gives freely and without the pressure of obligation, (3) does not expect “pay back,” and (4) stays focused on the loving relationship instead of keeping score of the amount given.

The graciousness at the heart of these virtues is good preparation for the losses and suffering that accompany old age. A life of gratitude prepares us to accept the care that we need from others, without any need to deny our dependency or push the caregiver away. A generous person, who sits loose to possessions and time, knows how to turn loose of these when they may be denied in our later years. And she knows the value of relationships built through giving and receiving of care.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to mention relatives or friends who are responding with grace to the dependency that attends old age. The four features of gratitude (and generosity) in the lesson suggest signs to mention: (1) *welcoming of relationship* with those who care for them and whom they care for; (2) *giving and receiving in love*, rather than obligation; (3) *avoiding thinking in terms of reciprocity* (i.e., “score-keeping”); (4) *focusing on relationship* rather than on the gifts received or given.
2. Older people who suffer chronic illness, disability, loss of a spouse, separation from family members, and so on, may be mentioned. In their grief they may have become bitter and withdrawn, demanding or suspicious of others. Did they exhibit gratitude and generosity earlier in their lives, but now have been changed by their suffering? Or did adversity bring out patterns of behavior that were present before? (If it is difficult for members to discuss people whom they know, focus attention on the stories of George and Steve in *Aging*, pp. 36-37.) What support does your congregation offer? What support could it offer?
3. Do members agree that loosening our “clutch on things material” in our later years is a “discipline” from God? If so, is this sometimes, or always the case? Notice that Schlater calls it is a “stern mercy.” It is obviously “stern.” How is it a “mercy”?
4. Organize the discussion around one or several of the four features of gratitude and generosity: How do we become more welcoming of relationships with those who care for us? How do we enter friendships based on love rather than other relationships based on contract or obligation? How do we learn to avoid “score-keeping”? etc.
5. Pierpoint mentions the enjoyment of earth and sky, especially the beauty of changing time (verse two); the pleasure of sense experience, especially the “mystic harmony” that mysteriously unites our various sensations of touch, sight, and hearing into an experience of one moment (verse three); the joy of care and friendship (verse four); and the Christian community that loves us and all people (verse five). All of these joys are foretastes of eternal life with God, “flowers of earth and buds of Heaven” (verse eight). The hymn ranges widely over our dependencies that produce joyful relationships: our senses combined in experience, temporal moments conjoined into movement through time, persons linked in caring relationships, and individuals incorporated into the Kingdom of God by the church.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Aging from the Perspective of the Cross

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate how Christians can take a more realistic view toward the suffering that often accompanies old age.
2. To reflect on what it means to bear our suffering as Jesus bore his sufferings.
3. To contrast the perspective of Christ's cross to some popular attitudes today toward dependency, personal value, and mutual responsibility.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the hymn "Abide With Me," locate the tune EVENTIDE in your church's hymnal. (An alternate tune is MORECAMBE.)

Begin with a Quote

We "take up our cross daily" and follow Jesus not only when we are afflicted as a result of identifying with Christ, but as we share in the suffering that is inevitable in the fallen world. Theologian Hans Küng has written, "But what is required of the person who believes in the crucified Jesus is something that frequently recurs and is therefore mostly more difficult than a single heroic act: it is the endurance of ordinary, normal, everyday suffering, which is then most likely to prove excessive. The cross to be borne is therefore the cross of everyday life. That this is far from being obvious or edifying is apparent to anyone who has seen how often a person tries to get away from his own cross, all his daily obligations, demands, claims, promises in his family or his calling; how he tries to shift his cross onto others or suppress it altogether" (quoted in *Aging*, p. 20).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members might bear their everyday sufferings in a manner that will bring honor to Jesus Christ and point others to his way.

Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Luke 9:21-25, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 and 4:7-10 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Looking at aging *exclusively* from the perspective of Christ's resurrection leads many Christians to be overly optimistic about aging and to not deal honestly and seriously with the suffering that often attends old age. Stephen Sapp recommends *supplementing* (but *not replacing*) that approach with the perspective of the cross.

Jesus warned disciples that they must “take up their cross daily” (Luke 9:23). Not only may we be afflicted as a result of identifying with Christ, but in varying degrees *we will share in the suffering that is inevitable in the fallen world*. Our everyday suffering can be “cross-bearing” if it is borne in a way correlating to or corresponding with the way in which Jesus dealt with his suffering. The study guide focuses on three correspondences with Christ’s suffering: (1) acknowledging our dependence upon God and other people, (2) refusing to accept the culture’s false values in relation to suffering, and (3) refusing to use our suffering as an excuse for bitterness or for escaping responsibility to others. As we, through God’s grace, bear our everyday suffering in this manner, we point others toward the way that Jesus bore his suffering. We fulfill Paul’s words: “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:11).

You may use this lesson to introduce themes that members will explore again in the other lessons. The theme of “acknowledging our dependence” is developed further in another study guide, “Declining with Grace.” The themes of “recognizing the true basis for personal value” and “accepting mutual responsibility” will echo through the study guides “Old and Full of Years” and “What’s Retirement For?”

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to share stories about older family members or church members whom they know personally.
2. Sapp quotes William F. May’s comment, “The middle aged do not want the elderly to encumber them, and the elderly do not want to lapse into a burden” (*Aging*, p. 21). We purchase products that promise continued vitality; we pay dearly for medical research to extend the length of life. Members may discuss how quickly we put the sick, the physically or mentally challenged, the mentally ill, and the elderly into institutions of care. Many are frightened when they visit these institutions.
3. Ask for concrete examples of “the prejudice that exists toward the elderly.” Does this prejudice reflect our fear of dependency and our misplaced valuing of persons on the basis of what they *do* and *have*? Notice that Carter believes some elderly persons accept and internalize this prejudice and devaluation of themselves.
4. Bondi’s comment suggests that even in old age we are called to loving service and responsibility toward others. Because our worth is determined by “the image of God who is love” and “God’s intention for us,” we should ‘see through’ and transcend the false values of our culture, which say that our worth depends on what we *do* and *have*.

Departing Hymn

“Abide With Me,” which is a hymn for Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, reminds us that Jesus’ suffering was for us and that he is continually present with us through worship. It is based on Jesus’ resurrection appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized [Jesus]; and he vanished from their sight” (Luke 24:29-31).

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

“Old and Full of Years”

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reading	Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret and apply the story of Abraham and Sarah’s gracious welcome of God’s purpose for their old age.
2. To reflect on today’s obstacles to living to be “full of years” in the biblical sense.
3. To appreciate the role of biblical stories and Christian art in restoring our imaginations and guiding us to positive values of old age.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Read the story of Lillian on p. 66 of *Aging*. It begins, “I am convinced that Lillian may never retire.” Consider how Lillian illustrates the biblical ideal of being “old and full of years.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with thanksgiving to God for those older persons whose lives continue to provide models for faithful discipleship.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Genesis 18:1-15 and 25:7b-11 from a modern translation.

Reading

Ask a group member to read this poem.

Reflection

Ask for members’ initial reaction to the opening statement, “If contemporary society continues to keep people alive and at the same time tell them that they no longer serve any purpose, then dying ‘in a good old age, old and full of years’ in the biblical sense will be a thing of the past.” Stephen Sapp develops this observation in his article: “Perhaps people are living beyond the point at which they are ‘full of years.’ Medical technology has become quite adept at keeping the bodily vessel around (and even in relatively good shape). Without an expansion of its capacity, of the purpose it exists to accomplish, however, the vessel cannot help ceasing to function as it should. Consequently it fails to be ‘full-filled’” (*Aging*, p. 23).

The Bible gives us a very different image of old age—that it can be a time of unexpected opportunity to serve God. This lesson interprets and celebrates this image in the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah, and in Christian art. Of course, older people should not feel guilty when they cannot contribute to their families, congregations, and communities as much as they desire. The biblical image of God’s calling in old age, however, should encourage them to escape the false values in our culture which would limit

their contribution. The next lesson, “What’s Retirement For?” will help us apply this biblical perspective to our own retirement.

Follow Terry Thomas Primer’s delightful retelling of the story in Genesis 18:1-15 in order to focus on: (1) Abraham and Sarah’s unexpected call from God to have a child in their very advanced age, and (2) their gracious welcome of this new ‘assignment.’ (See *Aging*, pp. 66-69.)

Conclude the discussion by explaining the “old and full of years” metaphor as a positive image of “full-filled” living, a life filled with purpose.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to share stories about older people in their families, the congregation, or in the local community, as well as mentioning people about whom they know indirectly through news reports, biographies, biblical stories, and the like.
2. Sapp is not opposed to enjoying increased recreational opportunities during our later years, but he believes that recreational pastimes, by themselves, cannot fill our lives with purpose. He also believes that the lowered social status of retired people is connected to their focusing on self-oriented recreation instead of making purposeful contributions. Do members agree about this? Invite them to describe the sorts of contributions to their families, congregations, and communities that they would *hope* and *prefer* to make when they retire.
3. Abraham and Sarah see themselves as able to support and encourage a new generation. (Members may know older people who are doing this through the lives of their grandchildren or other young people.) They are able to “shift direction” and commit to an important project that draws upon their talents and abilities. (Members might compare this to older people who have new careers in work or in volunteerism.) They continue to draw strength from one another and to partner in their work. (Do members know older people whose marriage grows stronger?) Abraham and Sarah are not perfect people, but are faithful to God’s call. (Older people can be open to new ministries today.)
4. Michelangelo portrays Moses as both physically powerful and spiritually determined. Members may notice his rippling muscles and ready-for-action posture. He is prepared for new challenges. *Godly Susan* shows Susan Medearis in a thoughtful, peaceful moment. She exhibits another kind of strength, for she has endured the limitations that result from a stroke. She is surrounded by beautiful farmlands and a church that may reflect her lifetime of contributions to family and friends. The rocker and comforter which she enjoys would indicate comfort and rest. (I cannot help but think that she is savoring the fact that her adoring, respectful grandson is painting her portrait.) The words of the master in Jesus’ parable come to mind: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23, KJV).
5. The first verse celebrates the “life bestowing wisdom” that comes only through rich experience over the years, “through tears of sorrow, tears of joy, [as] each day made its impression.” This does not make us busybodies who feel superior to younger people, for “We also sense that what we’ve heard demands of us we listen.” Verse three suggests that with time we may gain perspective to “see beyond what life presents.” This ability to weigh and value events from the perspective of age’s wisdom can benefit others: “Our lives enriched, we can enrich; now seasoned, we can season.” Thus the hymn points toward the contributions we can make in old age, and provides an answer to our “troubling thoughts that we may live beyond our contribution” to our families, congregations, and communities.

Departing Hymn

“Then Dawns the Light” is on pp. 55-57 of *Aging*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

What's Retirement For?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on the changing face of retirement in our culture.
2. To appreciate retirement as a season of grace in which we may grow in faithfulness and redirect our energies and gifts for ministry.
3. To consider how we can begin planning during mid-life years for the spiritual opportunities of retirement.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Beth Jackson-Jordan tells this story: "Sue, a slim, athletic-looking woman in her late sixties, came by my office to talk. 'I used to play golf every day,' she said. 'In fact, that's why we retired here from New York. My husband wanted to be in a place where he could play golf year round.' She looked out the window and sighed. 'But after about three months, I began feeling like there had to be something more. I don't think I'm going to be happy unless I find something more useful to do—something that will make a difference. I want more out of this time in my life than just playing golf.'"

"A few months after my conversation with Sue, I was walking down the hall of the skilled nursing facility where I worked. Hearing laughter from a room I was passing, I looked in and saw Sue, now a regular volunteer, in conversation with a frail resident. It seemed Sue had discovered a purpose in later life which could be fulfilled, not only on the golf course, but also in the room of one who needed what she had to give." (*Aging*, pp. 43-47)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with thanksgiving for God's call to service and care throughout our lives, from youth through old age.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Psalms 71:1-9 and 92:12-15 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This lesson focuses on the opportunities in retirement to grow in our relationship with God, explore and develop gifts, and respond to the call to new ministries. We should avoid two opposite distortions. One distortion is that retirement is simply a time of blessing and receiving our much deserved honor. This

idealization of retirement can be hurtful to those who experience unexpected loss and suffering in later years. The second distortion is that retirement is merely a period of loss and decline. This stereotype leads us to segregate older people in our families, congregations, and communities, and to be patronizing toward them. (See Jackson-Jordan's discussion of "old age as symbol of blessing" and "old age as symbol of loss" in *Aging*, pp. 44-45.) Psalms 71 and 92 help us to focus on old age as a calling, by inviting us to depend upon God's continuing presence and to claim the promise that "In old age [the righteous] still produce fruit."

Turner answers the question "What is retirement for?" by outlining four tasks for retirement: *reflection, reframing our lives, reconnecting to our ultimate values, and redirecting our energies and gifts*. The first task should begin in mid-life, long before we retire. If your group is in this mid-life age group, encourage them to use this lesson as guidance for their reflection. If your group includes retired persons, they might want to focus on one of the other three tasks.

Study Questions

1. Guide members to consider retirement goals that involve personal health and development, the health and development of a spouse, relationships with immediate and extended family members, contributions to their congregation, and involvement in the community. What work activities and recreational opportunities do they hope to enjoy? Where do they intend to live, and what support groups will they depend upon?

A list of retirement successes might get the brainstorming started: "A retired neighbor (and devout Christian) now spends his days working to build affordable housing for low-income families. A retired surgeon now finds himself heavily involved in lay ministry, including preaching, in his church. Another woman, having completed a career in music education, now serves her church as minister of music. In my last pastorate, I watched scores of retirees help to operate a clothing center, a food pantry, a hospital and apartment ministry, and a ministry to internationals—in addition to myriad other church program assignments. My own desires to preach and to mentor younger pastors are currently being satisfied with pulpit supply invitations and a part-time teaching job at a nearby seminary" (*Aging*, pp. 79).

Ask members to list significant dangers—concerning their health, the economy, important relationships, and so on—that threaten each of their goals.

2. Members may be planning for continued work opportunities, new avocations, or second careers; they may be pursuing additional education or making time for personal preparation and study. Some experiment with new ministries that they hope to pursue during retirement. Have members discussed their retirement plans with family members, older friends, or wise counselors in their congregation or community?
3. We cannot insulate ourselves from these realities. "At these moments we draw heavily upon our trust in God's sustaining grace," Turner observes. How should we nurture our relationships with God and other people who can support us during these painful times? Do members have friends, family members, church groups on whom they will depend for spiritual, financial, and other practical support?
4. Jackson-Jordan recommends writing an Ethical Will, which is "a document written at any point in life in which we record the beliefs and values by which we want to be remembered." Older adults might create Ethical Wills as spiritual legacies for their family and church communities. She describes a retreat at which older adults made video and audio recordings of "stories of friendship, faith, struggle, and hope" for their congregation.

Departing Hymn

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